

Thomas K. Bacon — The Arms and The Man

Lowell J. Wagner

THOMAS K. BACON

Thomas K. Bacon was a machinist turned entrepreneur, promoter, inventor, and real estate developer. Bacon was instrumental in forming three firearms companies which bore his name, and served as superintendent of a fourth firearms company during its critical development period. He was involved in the ownership and development of many parcels of real estate. These many activities notwithstanding, Bacon proved to be a poor business manager and apparently died broke.

Thomas K. Bacon was born in 1813, the son of Luther Bacon and the grandson of Ephriam Bacon. The first reference I have found places Bacon in Charleton, Massachusetts, in 1835; it involves a real estate transaction where Bacon is listed as a machinist. The first reference tying Bacon to the firearms industry is found in 1840 when Bacon moved to Grafton, Massachusetts, purchasing real estate from Ethan Allen. The deed shows Bacon living in Grafton and having the occupation of machinist. Because of this and future business transactions, I believe that Bacon went to Grafton to work in the firearms manufactory of Ethan Allen. He remained in Grafton until 1842. One of Bacon's last real estate transactions in Grafton involved a piece of land owned by Ethan Allen located on a waterway and suitable for the construction of a firearms factory. Whether Bacon intended to open his own shop in Grafton, purchased this piece of land as a real estate speculation, or took this land as a partial payment for services rendered to Allen is not known. We do know that Bacon sold the land upon his decision to move to Norwich, Connecticut, with Ethan Allen. Allen moved and set up his new manufactory in Norwich in 1842. Later that year we find Bacon wrapping up his real estate transactions in Massachusetts and listed as a machinist in Norwich, Connecticut.

During his early years in Norwich, Bacon was involved in many real estate transactions. An Allen & Thurber Daybook from 1846 shows that Bacon was producing cones and trigger guards for Allen. It



appears that Bacon was splitting his time between the manufacture of firearms components and real estate development. The 1846 Norwich Directory listing reads, "Bacon, Thomas K., Armory, Falls, h. Prospect"

When Allen left Norwich in July of 1847, Thomas Bacon decided to stay in Norwich and to continue with his own firearms manufacturing company. Bacon solicited the financial backing of Amos E. Cobb, who was to play an important role in Bacon's business life in Norwich. We will find Cobb a financial backer of all three of the Bacon companies, as well as a financial backer in some of Bacon's real estate transactions. Bacon & Company was formed sometime between 1847 and 1850. The first written verification of the existence of Bacon & Company is found in the 1850 census report. It appears that Bacon & Company continued as a small manufacturer of single shot pistols and percussion pepper boxes until approximately 1857, when Bacon became affiliated with the Manhattan Firearms Company as its superintendent. Bacon evidently was planning to manufacture a percussion revolver but decided that the superintendent's position of the new Manhattan Firearms Company had more potential.

Bacon was affiliated with Manhattan for approximately one year. For those of you who have read Nutter's book on the Manhattan Firearms Company, you will know that Manhattan sued Bacon when Bacon left Manhattan's employ to start

the Bacon Mfg. Co. It appears that the lawsuit was dropped and Bacon commenced to form the Bacon Mfg. Co., with the intention of manufacturing percussion revolvers of a design nearly identical to the Manhattan percussion revolver. I believe that Bacon was the primary designer of the Manhattan percussion revolver.

Bacon served as the superintendent and business agent for Bacon Mfg. Co. We find Bacon involved in many purchases and sales of stock in that company. Bacon continued in this capacity until October of 1863. A notice in the October 22, 1863, issue of the *Norwich Weekly Courier* reads:

“Sold out — Thomas K. Bacon, Esq., has, we are informed, disposed of his interest in the Bacon Fire Arms Co. to Charles A. Converse, who has been appointed general business superintendent. It is mainly through Mr. Bacon’s energy and ability that the company have been so successful as they have, and we doubt not that the business will still improve under the management of a man of so well known business ability as Mr. Converse.”

Charles Converse purchased the remaining shares of Bacon stock and became the major stockholder and superintendent of the company. Bacon Mfg. Co. was located during its entire life in a building owned by Charles Converse at the Falls. It was at this time that Thomas Bacon formed the new Bacon Arms Co. Bacon Mfg. Co. continued without its namesake until its sale to Converse and four employees in 1868. The new firm was to be called The Hopkins and Allen Manufacturing Company.

Late in 1863 or early 1864, Thomas Bacon and other investors established the Bacon Arms Co., which was to continue in business until 1888. Bacon sold all of his shares of Bacon Arms Co. stock on Oct. 2, 1865.


Bacon is listed as a pistol maker in the 1866 directory and as a “Pistol Mfg — Myers Alley” in 1867, and as an inventor in the directory listing for 1868. Bacon’s only known invention, patented on May 26, 1868, was for a drill holder. 1869 and 1870 show Bacon as an agent, for whom we do not know. He is listed with no occupation, probably due to his failing health, in 1871, 1872 and 1873.

Thomas Bacon died on November 16, 1873. He is buried in the Yantic Cemetery, approximately 200 feet from his Norwich home.

Ethan Allen decided to leave Norwich and to move his company to Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1847. Evidently Thomas Bacon was not willing to again follow Allen to his new location; he had become involved in many real estate transactions in Norwich, and had established an armory at the Falls to produce components for Allen’s firearms. He decided to start his own firearms manufacturing company, and solicited financial backing of Amos E. Cobb. Cobb was a successful farmer at Oxhill in Norwichtown, a small town that was then located just north of Norwich and is now a part of the city of Norwich. An advertisement in the 1851 Connecticut Business Directory shows Bacon and Cobb as owners of Bacon & Co. Bacon divided his time between the manufacture of firearms and the development of real estate. From 1847 to 1857, the time of operation of Bacon & Company, we find Thomas Bacon involved in nearly fifty real estate transactions.

The exact location of Bacon & Company has not been positively determined: we have found references to Bacon & Company located “at the Falls.” Bacon owned several pieces of property within two blocks of the Falls, which included his home, several pieces of undeveloped land and a commercial building. We know from a map prepared in 1850 that Bacon had at least one out-building connected with his home on Lafayette. All of these properties could have been considered to be located “at the Falls.” However, the 1850 census shows Bacon & Co. using water power: therefore, we can assume that they leased space in one of the industrial buildings in the Falls complex.

The 1850 census shows Bacon & Co. with \$3,500 invested in real and personal property; raw material used was estimated at \$1,000. They employed 14 male workmen with an average monthly labor cost of \$450. A very optimistic estimate of annual production was \$10,000: research of many guns manufactured by Bacon & Company shows that the total production of this company could probably be counted in the hundreds rather than the thousands of guns. Since the guns manufactured by Bacon & Co. were virtually hand made, such a small work force, together with Bacon’s real estate activities, shows why production at Bacon & Company was very limited. I will discuss the individual models and production projections

BACON & CO. 

MANUFACTURERS OF IMPROVED

PISTOLS,

UNDER-COCK REVOLVING & SINGLE RIFLE,
NORWICH, CONN.

T. K. BACON. A. E. CORB.

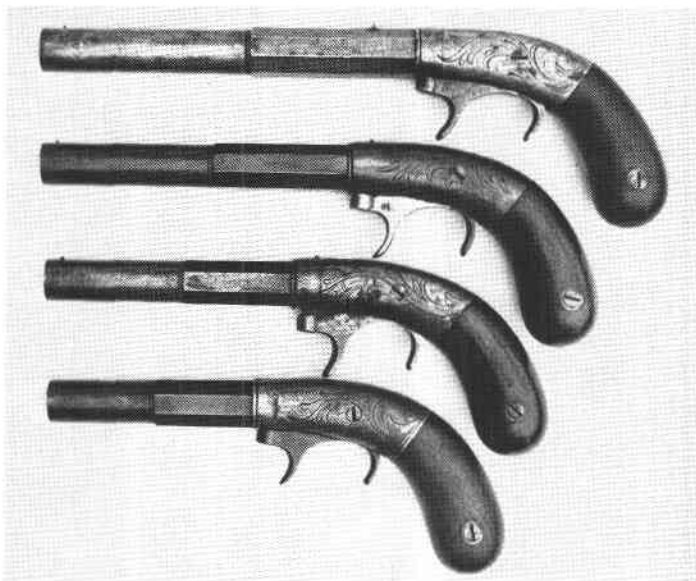
AGENTS.

NEW YORK.	BOSTON.
A. W. SPIES & Co.,	WM. READ, Market Square.
WM. H. SMITH & Co.,	
J. G. BOLEN,	PHILADELPHIA.
BENJAMIN J. HART,	JOHN M. COLMAN.
HENRY T. COOPER.	

From the 1851 Connecticut Business Directory



Underhammer, serial number 1.



Underhammers with "horn flower" engraving.

later in this presentation.

Bacon's ability to promote is evidenced by the number of reputable dealers who were selling the Bacon & Company product. We note in the ad from the 1851 Connecticut Business Directory that Bacon guns were being sold and distributed by A.W. Spies & Co., Wm. H. Smith & Co., J.G. Bolen, Benjamin J. Hart, and Henry T. Cooper of New York, as well as Wm. Read of Boston and John M. Colman of Philadelphia: these were some of the largest and most reputable dealers of that era.

Bacon & Company produced percussion single shot pistols and under-hammer pepperboxes. It appears that Bacon was planning production of a multi-shot percussion revolver upon the expiration of Colt's patent. We find, in the Manhattan Firearms Company lawsuit against Bacon, references to Bacon's plans to begin production of "pistols." Since Bacon was already producing single shot pistols and pepperboxes, we can presume that Bacon's plan to begin producing "pistols" refers to the manufacture of revolvers. Bacon evidently did not have the financial wherewithal to start a company large enough to manufacture the revolvers in 1857: this was the time that Bacon became associated with the new Manhattan Firearms Company.

BACON & COMPANY PRODUCTION

Thomas Bacon had been producing cones and guards for Allen and Thurber: it was natural that he should begin producing firearms of a nature similar

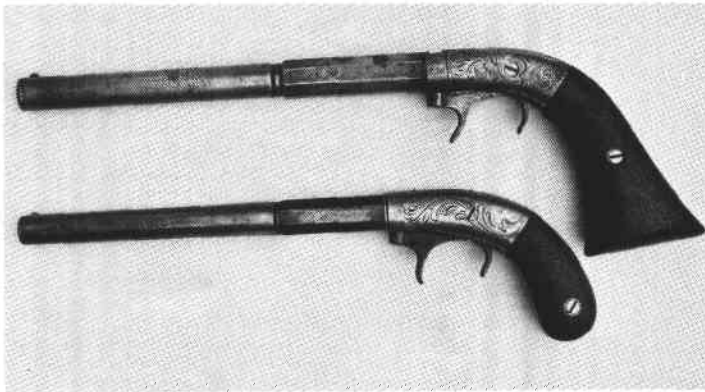
to Allen's, after opening his own manufacturing company.

While total production for Bacon & Company was very limited, the under-hammer, single shot pistol was probably the most successful; even at that, total production was probably less than 500 pistols.

Bacon manufactured these under-hammer single shot pistols in 3, 4, 5 and 6-inch barrel lengths in .34 caliber. Existing specimens show that the 4-inch was by far the most common, followed by a fairly large production of 5-inch barrel lengths, with the 3-inch being very scarce and the 6-inch a definite rarity. There are examples of very long barreled under-hammer Bacon pistols: it appears that these guns were made for use as target pistols. The under-hammer configuration allowed a clear sight plane over the top of the gun, allowing for the unrestricted placement of sights of the shooter's choice. All Bacon & Company under-hammer pistols which I have examined with barrel lengths exceeding 6 inches have had the barrels replaced after leaving



Ring triggers, scroll engraved.



Target models with non-factory barrels.



Long, non-factory barrel.



Bar hammer, 5" barrel cut to 4".

Bacon's factory. Either scroll or "Horn Flower" engraving will be found on all guns.

The second most common Bacon & Company production gun was the ring-trigger pistol. This was also produced in the 3, 4, 5 and 6-inch barrel lengths with either scroll or horn flower engraving. As with the others, a "batch number" system appears to have been used: I have not found serial numbers over 125 in any of the Bacon & Company firearms. I have, however, found enough duplications and triplications of numbers to suggest the use of the "batch number" or the "starting over" system. It is interesting to note that duplicate numbers often have an additional mark: a small trifoliate stamped next to the number. This suggests either a second series of numbers or a numbering error found during production with the additional mark being applied to separate the parts for two otherwise identically numbered guns during their manufacture. If this was the case, then production could have been less than 250 guns, but probably was around 400 in total.

Some people have speculated that Bacon & Company manufactured the Blunt and Syms ring trigger pistol. Comparing the Bacon with the Blunt and Syms pistols shows enough differences in the specifications to conclude that Blunt and Syms may have copied Bacon's ring trigger pistol but did not have their guns manufactured by Bacon & Co.

Bacon & Company made a large-frame bar hammer single shot percussion pistol, again in the four barrel lengths, which appears to have been produced in a very limited number. I have found no duplication of serial numbers; in fact, have found difficulty in obtaining any specimen of this bar hammer pistol for research and examination. I believe that less than 150 of the large-frame bar hammer model guns were manufactured. All guns that I have examined have received very rough usage. The guns are a typical bar hammer, double action gun without sights, engraved with scroll or horn flower engraving.

Examination shows that a large percentage of longer barrelled guns have been cut down to a 4-inch length. This can be determined by the length of the octagon portion of the barrel as it relates to the round portion. It would appear that these barrels were shortened before leaving the factory. I suspect that the bar hammer pistol was late production of the Bacon & Company; things were not going well, and an order came in for 4-inch barrel bar hammer pistols. Not having any 4-inch barrels in stock, it is

possible that Bacon dut down longer barrelled guns and filled the order.

Bacon & Company produced a separate small model bar hammer percussion pistol of .30 caliber. Pistols of this size are sometimes called "muff pistols" because their size makes for ease of concealment. All of the small frame bar hammer percussion pistols appear to be identical, with the exception of slight variations in barrel length: the standard length appears to be 2 inches. The frame is engraved with a scroll-type engraving and the grips are usually walnut.

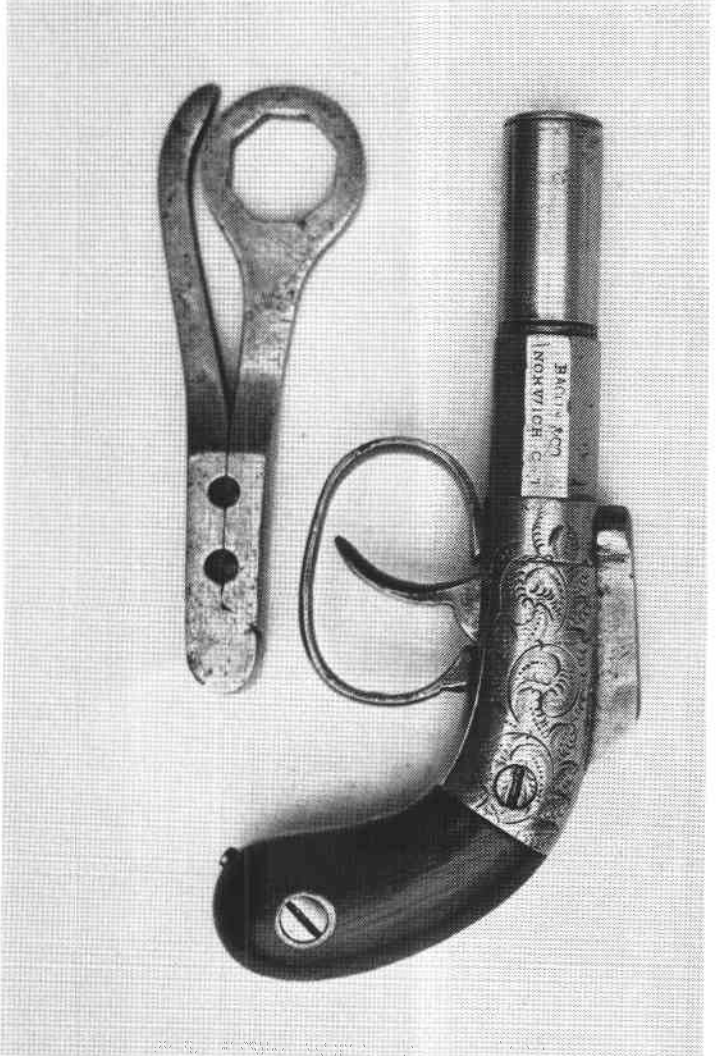
Allen and Wheelock, Manattan, and Blunt and Syms all produced guns virtually identical to the Bacon & Company model. There is a strong probability that Bacon was the first manufacturer to produce this particular gun, which was then copied by the other firms. Production appears to have been very limited, was probably less than 100 guns.



Large frame bar hammers, "horn flower" engraved.



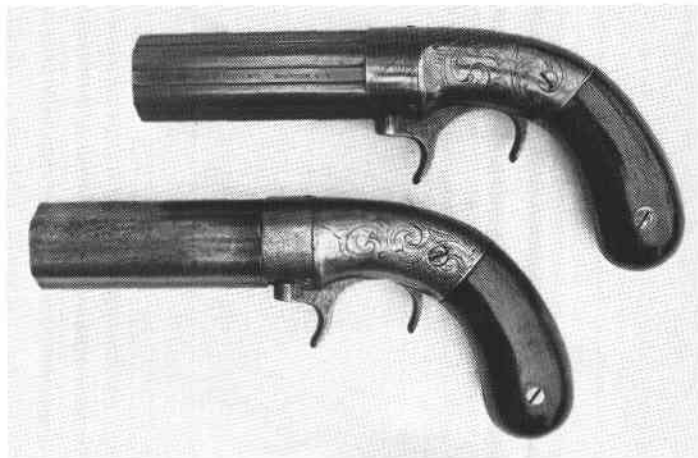
Bacon & Co. small frame bar hammers with Allen & Wheelock, Blunt & Sims, and Manhattan copies.



Bacon & Co. small frame bar hammer.



Bacon & Co. underhammer pepperboxes.



Ribbed (top) and fluted barrel groups.

I have heard reports that there are Bacon & Company single shot pistols using a shotgun hammer with a standard trigger and trigger guard. If they exist, they are extreme rarities. I have been collecting Bacon firearms for over fifteen years, have attended hundreds of gun shows, have purchased two large Bacon collections, and have never seen an

example of this model. There is no reason to believe that the gun was not produced: it would have been a simple matter in a small firm such as Bacon & Company to do so. If anyone has an example of this model in their collection, I would be extremely interested in an opportunity to personally inspect that gun.

Pepperbox revolvers were very popular during the 1840s and early 1850s. Bacon produced an under-hammer pepperbox with very symmetrical lines and a clear sight plane; these desirable features were offset by the somewhat cumbersome method of cocking the hammer.

None of the Bacon pepperboxes that I have examined have had factory-installed sights, even though the clear sight plane would have allowed for them; the need for sights was limited due to the relative inaccuracy of the smooth bore pepperboxes.

Bacon & Company pepperboxes were manufactured in barrel lengths approximately three to five inches. It appears that the lengths were cut at random, as nearly every pepperbox examined has a slightly different barrel length. Barrels of approximately four inches were the most common, with some as short as three inches and a very few approximately five inches in length.

The standard Bacon & Company pepperbox included a nipple shield, and most were decorated with scroll engraving. Other standard features included a ribbed barrel group of .30 caliber with walnut grips, although a very few early production pepperboxes were manufactured without ribs on the barrel groups. I consider this variation to be a definite rarity. Other variations include a non-engraved frame and grips other than walnut.

It is difficult to determine the total production of these pepperboxes. The highest serial number that I have seen is number 92; although I have found only one duplication of serial numbers in the guns that I have examined, I suspect that these guns were again numbered by the "batch method." Total production was probably under 200, possibly even less than 100.

Bacon apparently was planning to manufacture a percussion revolver after the expiration of Colt's patent: it is, therefore, possible that an experimental percussion revolver could have been made by Bacon prior to his association with Manhattan. I have not seen such a gun but believe that it could exist.

Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing Company

Bacon realized that the multi-shot revolver had the most potential for hand gun sales. Manhattan was a young company that was well financed, planning to manufacture revolvers and looking for a competent and experienced gun maker to supervise their plant. Bacon evidently determined that he had more future working as an inside contractor for this new company than expanding his own company for revolver production; he also appears not to have the necessary financial backing to start revolver production in 1857. In September of 1857, Manhattan contracted with Thomas Bacon to be Superintendent of their plant. Bacon would receive enough inside contractor work to keep himself and 3 boys busy producing barrels for single shot and pepperbox firearms; he would be paid from 5 cents to 40 cents per barrel, depending on type and length.

It appears that Bacon had a part in designing the Manhattan production models, which was probably done jointly by Bacon, Joseph Gruler and Augustus Rebetey, the latter also employees of Manhattan.

References to early prototype guns which were specially engraved and fitted with fancy grips, with each specimen showing certain different ideas as a possible production model, are known. One such model had 5 cylinder stops instead of Manhattan's standard 10, as well as a ball-type loading lever catch, typical of Bacon rather than the standard navy-type catch of Manhattan. This specimen is reported to have a small "B" stamped under the grips. I own a serial #8 Manhattan gun, which has special engraving and special grips, and a "B" stamped under the grips. Other specifications of the gun are standard for Manhattan except for the typical Bacon 5 cylinder stops. Three serial #8 guns exist, with virtually identical specifications. Were these made for samples or for stockholders? Why were they all marked with the same serial number? Perhaps several guns of each variation were made with all guns of each variation carrying the same serial number. There are still unanswered questions about these guns!

BACON MANUFACTURING COMPANY

Thomas Bacon was not satisfied working as the Superintendent and inside contractor for Manhattan. While employed at Manhattan, he continued his efforts toward his goal of forming a company to manufacture percussion revolvers. The



Thomas Bacon-made serial number 8 Manhattan revolver.

Bacon Mfg. Co. was incorporated in September of 1858; original stockholders included Bacon and 10 other businessmen. Within a few months, Bacon's old partner, A.E. Cobb, became a stockholder and an officer of the company. The company was capitalized at \$20,000; as of January 23, 1860, Thomas Bacon was the largest stockholder with 120 of 800 issued stocks.

When Bacon left Manhattan, a lawsuit was instigated by the officers of the Manhattan firm attempting to stop Bacon from leaving and from forming his new company for the manufacturing of revolvers. Bacon had agreed not to compete against Manhattan in the manufacture of any firearms for 20 years; this was a part of Bacon's employment contract, but officers of Manhattan never executed the agreement. Evidently the lawsuit was dropped: there appear to be no judgments regarding it in the court records.

Bacon Mfg. Co. operated in two rooms in the north part of the third floor of the Auger Mill building owned by Charles Converse at the Falls. Also leased was the north part (as divided) of second story of the wheelhouse at Commonwealth works. Also, Smith's shop west of said mill and the ground room adjacent for cool house, annealing and for flueing furnaces. Water power would be furnished equal to 4 horsepower from 6 a.m. to 12 noon and 1 p.m. to 7 p.m., to make pistols, firearms, machinery and hardware. The lease was for \$400 per year, payable quarterly beginning January 1, 1859, and for two years starting November 1, 1858, with a three-year option to renew.

Corporate stock transfer records show that shares of stock in Bacon Mfg. Co. changed hands

many times. Bacon was involved in several of these transactions, both buying and selling shares, sometimes on the same day. B.J. Hart of New York, a well known sporting goods dealer and distributor, became a stockholder in May of 1859. Guns sold by B.J. Hart & Bro. were first marked Bacon Mfg. Co. Depot 297 New York: this was Hart's address on Broadway. On October 24, 1862, Tomes, Son and Melvaine, New York dealers, purchased stock in Bacon Mfg. Co.; this firm also sold many of the Bacon guns.

B.J. Hart sold all of his stock in the company by December 19, 1863; and by January 1, 1866, Tomes, Son & Melvaine had sold their stock. As stockholders of the company, B.J. Hart & Bro. and Tomes, Son & Melvaine sold substantial numbers of Bacon Mfg. Co. firearms. The second model Bacon Mfg. Co. percussion revolvers are many times marked with the name stamp of B.J. Hart & Bro., N.Y.; Tomes, Son & Melvaine, N.Y.; Union Arms Co., N.Y., and Western Arms Co., N.Y.

It appears that there was a serious internal conflict between Bacon and Charles Converse. Converse was Bacon Mfg. Co.'s landlord; he purchased his first shares of stock in February of 1863. He purchased many more shares of stock, gained control of the corporation and became the Secretary of the Corporation by October of 1863. Converse did not like Bacon's management ability, forced Bacon out of the company, and from that time acted as general agent of Bacon Mfg. Co.

Rollin White was granted patent #12649 on April 13, 1855, for a bored-through cylinder, and assigned this patent to Smith & Wesson in November 17, 1856. The desirability of the patent and salability of guns using this patent was obvious. Several companies, including Bacon Mfg. Co., produced firearms in direct infringement of the White patent. Lawsuits were started against Herman Boker, agent for the Manhattan cartridge revolver. White and S&W won in October of 1862; an injunction was issued against Bacon Mfg. Co.'s production of guns manufactured under this patent infringement on June 1, 1863. Bacon Mfg. Co. settled their differences with Smith and Wesson late in 1863: they agreed to a settlement of \$8,250 for the production of 5440 revolvers. All guns to be manufactured by Bacon Mfg. Co. under this patent were to be marked "Manufactured for Smith & Wesson" and sold to S&W at various prices. Bacon Mfg. Co. stated their current prices: the .38 Navy

Hopkins Patent were to be sold for \$16, the .38 Navy Pin Model for \$14, .32 Hopkins Patent pocket at \$12, the .32 pocket Pin Model at \$8.50, and the .22 pocket revolver at \$10. The final prices paid at S&W for Bacon Mfg. Co. guns ranged from \$6.00 for the .22 old style pocket revolver to \$12 for the .38 Navy. Production cartridge revolver models manufactured by Bacon with the "Pat. April 3, 1855" patent date stamped on the cylinder are known. Bacon Mfg. Co. sold about 1100 guns to S&W; however, for all practical purposes, the cartridge revolver production of Bacon Mfg. Co. was ended.

Bacon Mfg. Co. continued to manufacture firearms until their demise in 1868: percussion revolvers, single shot cartridge pistols and the Lady's Companion Continental Arms .22 caliber pepperbox. A Dunn credit report on August 30, 1867, reported that Bacon Mfg. Co. was making arrangement to close up their business, having \$20,000 worth of pistols on hand. Another Dunn report in May of 1868 reported Bacon Mfg. Co. as still having \$20,000 of pistols in stock; they had done little or no business for 2 years. With the combination of the poor management of Charles Converse and with the end of production of the cartridge revolvers, Bacon Mfg. Co. went down hill very quickly.

A new company, Hopkins and Allen Mfg. Co., made up of Converse and four Bacon Mfg. employees, was formed in May of 1868. The original stockholders were Converse, Charles W. Hopkins, H.A. Briggs, Samuel S. Hopkins and Charles W. Allen. Original capitalization of the company was \$6,000.

Hopkins & Allen purchased all of the assets of Bacon Mfg. Co., and began production of Hopkins and Allen firearms using the equipment and leftover parts of the Bacon Mfg. Co. They remained in business until 1915.

The conclusion of Mr. Wagner's talk with appear in a future *Bulletin*.